Laying the Groundwork

A good spokesperson is a trusted messenger. Whether you are engaged in one-on-one conversation, being interviewed by local media, or presenting to 500 people, honing your skills as a spokesperson can help shine a light on the impact of your important work and reach populations that might not otherwise know why these efforts matter.

You may think only a “born natural” is qualified to be a spokesperson, but in reality, everyone should be able to articulate the value of their work with focus and clarity. All it takes is deliberate preparation—and practice.

This guide walks you through four steps to prepare you for media interviews.

1. Consider your objectives and your audiences for any interview.
2. Prepare your message.
3. Prepare to speak.
4. Practice interview techniques.

Let’s get started.

1. Consider your objectives and your audiences for any interview.

As you prepare for any opportunity to speak about your organization and mission, answer these questions first:

- What would you like your audience to know or do as a result of hearing your message?
- Who are your key audiences? What do you know about them?
- What are their needs, values, and priorities?
Communication Fundamentals

Being an Effective Spokesperson:
A How To Guide

- How do they feel about your issue?
- How does your issue benefit them? Why should it be important to them?
- What might prevent them from supporting your issue (the “cost”)?

By considering your own goals and objectives, as well as the concerns of your audiences, you are better poised to craft a message that will resonate with them.

2. Prepare Your Message

Message Framework

One of the most critical jobs of any spokesperson is to represent your organization’s issues and positions with accuracy, clarity, and consistency. This is often described as “staying on message.”

Once you have an understanding of your audience, this framework can consistently help you develop an overarching message or elevator pitch tailored to your audience. The components of your message will help you articulate your issue and make the case for your solution.

We recommend a simple and concrete four-step process for framing your messages:

1. **Specify the problem in your community.** Grab attention by presenting a compelling fact or real life example. Avoid using difficult-to-understand percentages or public health jargon.

2. **Illustrate the current landscape.** Explain why this issue matters. Explain what is at stake—and what the consequence is if nothing is done. You can illustrate the number of people impacted with human stories of local residents by providing compelling local data and appealing to the core values and priorities of your community.

3. **Describe the solution.** Provide a sense of hope. Help audiences see that the solution is realistic and achievable. Offer concrete examples of successes you are seeing (data, stories) and link your progress back to your community’s core values and priorities.

4. **Define what the individual or groups should do.** Clarify how audiences can support your solution—either individually or collectively—with realistic, concrete direction.

Remember “one size does not fit all,” and different audiences respond to different messages. This is why we always want to consider our audiences before we develop our message. Often,
we need to develop multiple messages to resonate with the many audiences we are trying to reach.

These additional tips may help you craft strong language:

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<td>Public health jargon (e.g., “social determinants of health” or “risk factors”)</td>
<td>Common, simple language</td>
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<td>Blaming or focusing on disparities</td>
<td>Focus on impact of both the problem and your solution on the entire community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social determinants (e.g., socioeconomics, race, gender)</td>
<td>Focus on universal truths (e.g., “Health belongs in our homes, schools, workplaces, and communities.”)</td>
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<td>Overlooking individual behavior</td>
<td>Incorporate the role of personal responsibility, which resonates across all audiences</td>
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3. Prepare to Speak

Timeline for a Strong Presentation, Interview, or Press Conference

2 Days before
- Review and re-review script, messages, or talking points.
- Decide key points above all else.
- Consider what take-away feeling you want the audience to have at the end.
- Pick out comfortable clothes and shoes.

1 Day before
- If giving a presentation, say script out loud, looking ahead (i.e., pretend you’re looking out at and just above an audience or at the reporter), and in the shoes you will wear.
- If doing a media interview, practice your delivery and handling of anticipated questions.
- Loosen up, take deep breaths, stretch your arms out wide to open rib cage and lungs.

Day of
- Get away for 5-10 minutes.
- Loosen up, take deep breaths, stretch your arms out wide to open rib cage and lungs.
During speech, presentation, or interview

- Assume the persona of the feeling with which you want to leave the audience (e.g., energized, positive.)
- Smile and breathe.
- Take your time, pause on an important point.

Finding Your Confidence

If you feel anxious speaking in front of others, you are in good company. A 2012 study\(^1\) reported that U.S. residents cite their fear of public speaking more often than any other fear, including death. Let us assure you that nerves are normal, and here are five strategies for successfully rising above them:

1. **Practice, practice, practice.** Know your message, your data, and your story well.

2. **Get the lay of the land.** Whether you will be making a presentation or taking questions at a press conference, it may help to visit the space and become comfortable with your surroundings. At the very least, arrive early. If you will be interviewed on television or radio and have advance notice, be sure to watch or listen to the program for a week or more to get a feel for the show. You might also check the program’s Web site for archived footage that you can review.

3. **Anticipate questions and prepare answers.** Your audience may want to know more about your successes and challenges, or an interviewer may want to take your conversation in a different direction. See the “Interview Techniques” below for help on how you can respond to tough questions.

4. **Show your enthusiasm.** When we watch a good spokesperson in action, we see genuine engagement, and this is a measure of the passion brought to bear by the spokesperson. When we give ourselves permission to share our enthusiasm, we can appear more confident, relaxed, and connected. Let your audiences know how committed you are to the positive impact your work is having in your community.

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5. **Consider—and prepare for—the differences between television, radio, and print interviews.** The key difference, of course, is that you’ll actually be seen in-person on camera and not as such in print. The distinction is worth noting.

- **Television interviews:** Studies conducted at UCLA in the 1960s\(^2\) demonstrated that, in face-to-face communication, we pay significant attention to non-verbal cues like vocal tone and body language.

  In other words, in a television interview, we want to pay extra attention to the way we hold our bodies and even what we wear. Practice delivering messages with a relaxed but confident posture, shoulders back. Recognize that you can add visual emphasis to important points by leaning forward slightly.

  Remember that a smile and bright, wide eyes demonstrate your enthusiasm and belief in the positive impact of your work.

  When it comes to choosing attire that’s well-suited for the camera, we want to focus on you—not your outfit. Here are some general rules:

  - Muted hues, like gray, beige, and pastel colors generally work best. Avoid black and white clothing. Vivid colors may or may not work, depending on lighting.
  - Avoid stripes, polka dots, or complex patterns. They can strobe or jitter on camera and be distracting.
  - Avoid shiny fabrics that might reflect studio lights.
  - Choose fabrics made from natural fibers. They are less likely to show signs of perspiration.
  - Choose simple jewelry and accessories.

- **Radio interviews:** Without a visual image, audiences have only words and vocal tone to help them form an impression. Vocal tone really matters, so try smiling when answering questions. Professional disc jockeys are trained to smile when they speak into the studio microphone. It may never be seen, but the enthusiasm is felt by listeners.

- **Print interviews:** While your public audience will have no idea how you looked, sounded, or behaved when you gave your print interview, your journalist will. Journalists are human, too, and their perceptions can influence their reporting, even if it is subconsciously. Whether conducting your interview in-person or on the phone, the same principles for a broadcast interview apply. Make a positive impression by presenting yourself as professional, confident, upbeat, and positive.

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Other Considerations: Your interview may be live or taped. A taped interview might be edited, and you will have little control over the final outcome. Either way:

- You will want to keep your vocal chords hydrated and drink plenty of water before the interview begins.
- Try and learn who else might be on any program with you.
- Never lie or make up details. If you are unsure of an answer, just let your interviewer know you will have to get back to him or her.

4. Practice Interview Techniques

Every interview is an opportunity to share your successes and the impact your work has had across your wider community. The four simple techniques below can help you control that conversation, even in a tough interview. As you think about possible questions or challenges you might get, use these techniques to practice your answers.

K.I.S.S.

Keep It Simple. Stay on message. Revisit your messages and themes throughout the interview. That’s your reason for being there.

HEADLINING

This is where you set up your answer in a way that starts with a “listen up” phrase. Sometimes people call this “highlighting” or “flagging.” These phrases act as an audible cue for your audience to know that something important is coming up next (e.g., “This last point is particularly relevant because...”).

BRIDGING

This is a way to acknowledge the question that’s been asked and steer the conversation back to your key message. For example, “That’s an interesting point, and I think people may be interested in knowing...” or “Let me also add...” or “I think the real question is...”

HOOKING

Interviews are often edited to be very short and reporters aren’t always going to give you the opportunity to get in all of your messages. Hooking is a way to share more information than was asked by “hooking” a series of related points together (e.g., “There are two important aspects to that answer. The first is...; the second key idea is...”).
Quick DO’s and DON’Ts

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<tr>
<td>• Do know when to stop talking.</td>
<td>• Don’t say “no comment.” Instead, return (“bridge”) back to your key messages.</td>
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<td>• Do take a moment to think before answering the question.</td>
<td>• Don’t use jargon, acronyms, or technical terms.</td>
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<td>• Do use notes if it’s an off-camera interview.</td>
<td>• Don’t be negative about the opposition.</td>
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<td>• Do look at the reporter if you’re on camera.</td>
<td>• Don’t answer hypothetical questions.</td>
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<td>• Do assume the microphone is always on.</td>
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<td>• Do speak slowly and clearly.</td>
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<td>• Do sound positive, friendly, and professional.</td>
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